



## Best Practices: Dance Making Democracy

By Rebecca Fitton

I imagine the democratic process as dual attempts of improvised movement and verbal descriptions of the constantly in-flux motion created by politics. Conversation swirls between stakeholders, legislation cycles through edits, and public policy impacts everyday life. However, the performance of democracy, in what is now known as the United States of America, is often interpreted as an institutionalized, routinely oppressive, and sterile experiment that most negatively affects communities systematically excluded from mainstream political conversations. Lost is the churning, colorful, and creative potential of collective decision-making that I witness in my communities.

My participation in democratic systems is the opposite of linear. I am an immigrant, queer, disabled, neurodivergent, mixed-race, and Asian American. I am a community member, sister, daughter, partner, and friend. These non-binary identity markers inform my civic engagement; my definition of citizenship is inclusive of my multiplicities and expands past any legal definition or solitary action.

*Best Practices*, a ten-minute dance film, is a satirical take on democracy's performance in my artistic, administrative, and scholarly work as a "dance maker," or an agent for change and increased legibility in the domestic dance ecosystems (Wilbur 3). Through a performance as research methodology, I ask, what can be gained by embodying institutional systems and democratic processes?

I employ a performance as research methodology for *Best Practices*, in order to uncover another dimension of how policy is practiced within and upon its citizenry. I investigate the "material, epistemological, and ontological fundamentals" of performance and ask, what is an "affective

and effective praxis” (“About”). *Best Practices* performs the inherent failures of four current institutional systems and democratic processes – fiscal sponsorship, feedback loops, democratic ladder theory, and top-down community engagement strategy – to tease apart how white supremacy is embedded into nonprofit arts institutions, build upon previous scholarship into dance’s political mobilization efforts, and inject humanity into the mundane choreographies of policy which are typically held at a critical distance. I attempt to “overread” – dancing between the lines – my analysis, through improvisation scores cued by live, projected drawings of the four systems (Martin 17). The script, sound score, and edit pull together the final product’s satirical edge. I employ this dark humor to reflect how the nonprofit industrial complex benefits from disembodied participants and harms individuals who share similar identity markers and socio-political economic power with me.

The resulting film, *Best Practices*, is admittedly fairly illegible as a political call to action, so this essay addresses the research in two sections to shed light on the goals of this project. The first section describes the four institutional systems and democratic processes featured in *Best Practices*, and the second details the creation process of the film. Together the film and essay hope to align with Judith Hamera’s provocation that posits performance has the “potential to remake the world and our abilities to know and theorize it” (208). Ultimately, the goal of *Best Practices* is to reflect the current, oppressive version of democracy in the US through a moving, kaleidoscopic lens, prompting the imagination towards a system of radical democracy malleable enough to truly support those who share identity markers that resonate with my own.

## **1. THE FOUR INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS AND DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES EMPLOYED IN *BEST PRACTICES***

As a former nonprofit administrator, current artist manager, and arts policy advocate, I often encounter the term ‘best practices.’ Performing a best practice means the laborer achieved a balance of efficacy, correctness, and productivity. However, best practices have the potential to become stagnant, accepted norms that do not receive recurring assessments or critiques. To create *Best Practices*, I identified four systems and processes deemed ‘best practices’ that I believe are overdue for a critical analysis and would benefit from a performance as research methodology due to the inherent movement of power described by the processes. Fiscal sponsorship, feedback loops, democratic ladder theory, and top-down community engagement strategy are four relatively “fuzzy concepts...ideas which...flourish precisely because of their imprecision” and are destined to be flawed (Nicodemus 214). Despite the inevitable fuzziness, I choose to be flexible to imagine my own *Best Practices* performance.

### **1.1 FISCAL SPONSORSHIP**

Fiscal sponsorship is a “formal arrangement in which a 501(c)(3) public charity provides financial and legal oversight to an entity that does not have its own 501(c)(3) status” and involves at least three stakeholders: a funder, a fiscal sponsor, and a project (Blake 12).<sup>1</sup> All fiscally sponsored transactions must carry a monetary fee, typically a percentage per donation, as the fiscal sponsor organization must not “collapse into a ‘conduit’ or ‘step transaction’” (Colvin and Petit 44). The two models of

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I employ ‘nonprofit’ and ‘501(c)(3)’ interchangeably and follow the Internal Revenue Service’s (IRS) definition of 501(c)(3)s, see more, “Exempt Organization Types.”

fiscal sponsorship most prevalent in the nonprofit arts are Model A, “Direct Project,” and Model C, “Preapproved Grant” (Colvin and Petit 14).<sup>2</sup> In Model A, the fiscal sponsor absorbs the project into the 501(c)(3) (see fig. 1). In Model C, the project retains its own prerogative and remains a separate legal entity, though its fundraising efforts must align with the sponsor’s mission (see fig. 2). In the nonprofit dance ecosystem, fiscal sponsorship’s growth as a best practice is related to philanthropy’s efforts towards equity, as fiscally sponsored projects can be eligible to receive funds or donations through the nonprofit sponsor.

In *Best Practices*, I dance the instability of fiscal sponsorship process as I predict the process not succeeding in its long-term effects to increase financial equity in the field. While the process does direct more funds to artistic entities otherwise ineligible for grants, the repeated extraction of funds by predominately white-led fiscal sponsors does not build long-term stability or sustainability, thus underperforming the financial equity that supporters of fiscal sponsorship celebrate. As evidenced by Dance/NYC’s 2017 report, *Advancing Fiscally Sponsored Dance Artists & Projects*, even though the process is widely used as a method of increasing funding opportunities, over 67% of respondents were white. In comparison to New York City’s demographic data, only 33% of its population is white, which indicates a large race and ethnicity discrepancy (Blake 10). From this data, I conclude that non-white artists are facing financial barriers to accessing fiscal sponsorship and therefore grants that would shift the historic financial inequity between racial and ethnic groups.

---

<sup>2</sup> For a more in-depth analysis of the six most accepted models of fiscal sponsorship, see Colvin and Petit’s *Fiscal Sponsorship: 6 Ways To Do It Right* and [fiscalsponsorshipdirectory.org](http://fiscalsponsorshipdirectory.org).

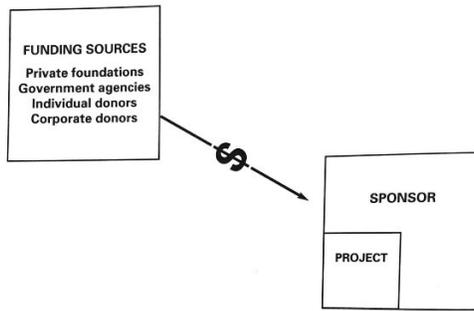


Fig. 1. Direct Project/Model A, Colvin, Gregory L. and Stephanie L. Petit. *Fiscal Sponsorship: 6 Ways To Do It Right*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., San Francisco, Study Center Press, 2019, p. 14.

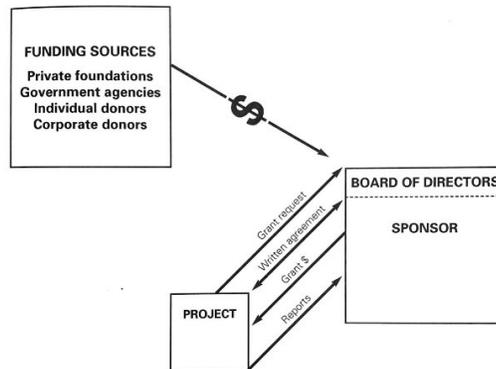


Fig. 2. Preapproved Grant/Model C, Colvin, Gregory L. and Stephanie L. Petit. *Fiscal Sponsorship: 6 Ways To Do It Right*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., San Francisco, Study Center Press, 2019, p. 27.

### 1.2 FEEDBACK LOOP

Feedback loops are a systems-thinking concept that describes a problem-solving process that seeks to identify potential solutions to complex, interconnected issues and is employed in contrast to linear or conventional thinking. (see fig. 3) (Stroh 16). In *Best Practices*, I specifically perform a negative feedback loop to represent recurring, undesired outcomes related to an identified problem, in this case, an “echo chamber... an environment in which the opinion, political leaning, or belief

of users about a topic gets reinforced due to repeated interactions with peers or sources having similar tendencies and attitudes” (Cinelli et al. 1).

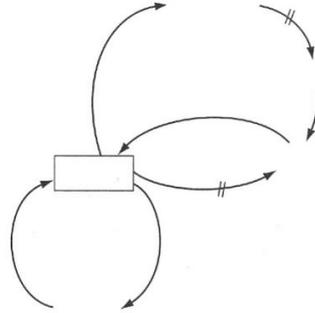


Fig. 3. Stroh, David Peter. *Systems Thinking for Social Change*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015, p. 170.

### 1.3 DEMOCRATIC LADDER THEORY

Andrew J. Perrin defines the “democratic ladder” theory as the way “people’s preferences are communicated and represented as government” (Perrin 42). He describes two, linear and hierarchical systems in his “democratic ladder” theory (see fig. 4). Perrin finds fault with the first version of the ladder because “institutions don’t just carry citizen preferences upwards to government, they also carry ideas and information down...” (45). In response, he proposes a two-way democratic ladder that features two, bi-directional, elliptical arrows on either side to depict the flow of information. Through the performance of *Best Practices*, I attempt to dance the linearity depicted by Perrin using my queer, mixed-race, disabled, Asian American body, identity markers that literally reject the straightness and duality of Perrin’s theoretical diagram.

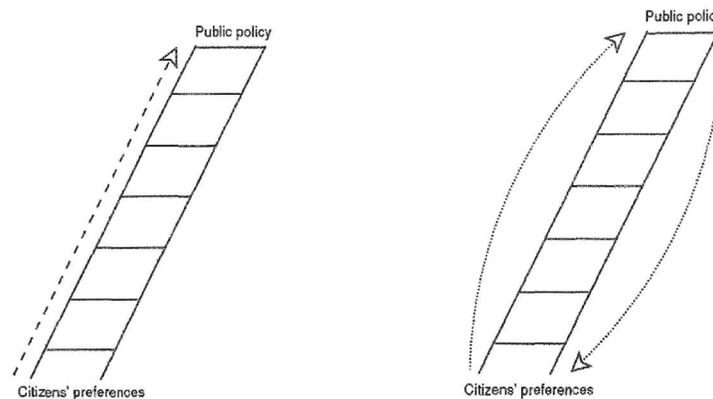


Fig. 4. Perrin, Andrew J. *American Democracy: from Tocqueville to Town Halls to Twitter*. Polity, 2014, pp. 43 & 36.

#### 1.4 TOP-DOWN COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

Community engagement strategy in the arts nonprofit field is currently dominated by the theory of “creative placemaking,” a term codified by The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). The NEA defines creative placemaking as when “partners from public, private, non-profit, and community sectors strategically shape the physical and social character of a neighborhood, town, city, or region around arts and cultural activities” (Markusen and Gadwa 3). The diagram below is applicable to many strategies of community engagement, however, in *Best Practices*, I analyze it through the framework of creative placemaking (see fig. 5). I focus on the top, down, hierarchical direction and value of stakeholders’ power to ask whether the community engagement strategy truly works for and with the communities it seeks to serve or if the process is merely a neoliberal experiment.

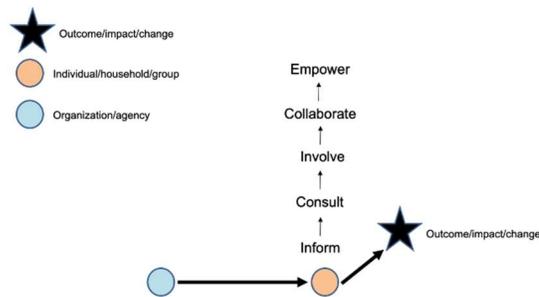


Fig. 5. Bixler, Patrick R. “Mobilizing Communities and Engaging Volunteers.” 7 January 2022, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX. Lecture.

## 2. THE CREATION OF *BEST PRACTICES*

*Best Practices*, layers together fifteen creative responses to the four institutional systems and democratic processes, in a ten-minute film. The layers include five live-notated scores, five dance improvisations, two audio description narrations, a sound score, an adapted script voiceover, and the final video/sound edit. In my writing about the work, I first describe the creation process and then attempt to overread each element in relation to my research questions about how to embody policy.

### 2.1 NOTATION

At the beginning stages of imagining *Best Practices*, I observed that the previously described four systems and processes all shared simple diagrams reminiscent of dance notations or written improvisational scores. Notation for dance is a relatively uncommon practice, especially in contemporary dance, for a variety of reasons. First, gatekeepers in the nonprofit dance sector do not activate all the resources available, and hiring notators is expensive (Villanueva 181).<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the most well-

<sup>3</sup> Scarcity mindset is prevalent within the nonprofit dance ecosystem, but a few futurist-grassroots philanthropy scholars argue that there is not a lack of funds; instead there is an

known, written notation practices were developed by white people, and for western dance. Finally, notation is very difficult. Movement is complex and dynamic. It is hard to catch every detail and impossible to fully depict the embodied experience. However, by viewing the diagrams as improvisational scores, such as Yvonne Rainer's score for "Trio B: Running," I could use the diagrams to re-embody how power and therefore policy moves through democratic processes ("Yvonne Rainer").

*Best Practices* features the live scores drawn on an overhead projector that projects the image onto the studio's back wall. The projector's light and the lines' shadows dance across my body as I move. My peer, Shannon Woods, draws, and erases the scores, thus setting the performance demonstration's timeframe. Woods is a white woman, an element that is important to address in the context of *Best Practices*. The score process and examples I reference draw from white cultures are largely responsible for systemic, historic harm on non-white and otherwise marginalized bodies. This relationship and power dynamic is mirrored in *Best Practices*; Woods' notations control my performance. Because of this re-performance, I shared my ethical considerations and questions with Woods prior to working together, should I be performing white colonial constructs under this staged relationship? What are the stakes for an Asian American person within neoliberal democracy and nonprofit industrial complex? How have I benefitted from white institutions as an English citizen and white person? Am I reperforming my own oppression? I also asked Woods about her experience after filming finished. She described her experience as "calm and task-oriented" (Woods). My

---

unwillingness to activate all the funds available. This is especially directed towards private foundations who are required to distribute at least 5% of their annual endowment each year. However, Villanueva asks, why not more? The crisis of the pandemic somewhat activated answers as a few foundations distributed more than their required amount, including the Ford Foundation, see Walker and Villanueva for more.

presence “didn’t change what [she] was doing” as she “only saw [me] through the mirror or through the iPhone.” Woods echoed my own analysis of her involvement, and by extension democracy at large, reflecting that “[it’s] easy for people with privilege to embrace their role as objective, passive participants.” I argue that this passivity is reflected in the lack of embodied, critical engagement with the systems and processes I utilize in *Best Practices*.

## 2.2 DANCE

My performance demonstrations in *Best Practices* are improvisations based on the four institutional systems and democratic processes previously mentioned. Since I used Rainer’s score technique to identify potential movement patterns, I also allowed myself to lean heavily on her movement style. I borrowed the “ambulatory aesthetic” from *We Shall Run’s* (1963) directional running patterns and *Trio A’s* (1966) pedestrian transitions (Platt 41). From Rainer’s *No Manifesto* (1965), I translated “No to spectacle. No to virtuosity... No to involvement of performer or spectator...No to moving or being moved” into directives—avoid eye contact with the camera, maintain an apathetic face, and resist moving naturally (Rainer).<sup>4</sup> During rehearsals, I warmed up my body in my typical amalgamation of yoga, Pilates, and improvisational dance. Then, I projected the 1978 film of *Trio A*, to re-establish the post-modern aesthetic in my dancing body. Immediately after completing the dance-along, I filmed *Best Practices’* five sections.<sup>5</sup> The rehearsal process was short and focused and after a few rehearsals, Woods and I only spent two-hours filming. In part, the brevity of the in-studio creation period was

---

<sup>4</sup> Rainer has since updated her *No Manifesto*. See more, Rainer and “Yvonne Rainer.”

<sup>5</sup> For more on Rainer’s body of work, see “Judson Dance Theater” and “Trio A (The Mind is a Muscle – Part I).”

because I found the movement was difficult to maintain as my self-directives required me to distill, simplify, and withhold my dancing in a way that I did not enjoy. I felt restricted and unsure and constantly needed to remind myself to return to the scores and their meanings.

This experience is not dissimilar from my interactions with predominately white arts institutions. In those environments, I am pushed back into place when I perform non-conformity and am placated by passive promises for change – a phrase that can easily be applied to the process of moving legislation from citizens’ preferences to public policy. In *Best Practices*, I emphasize the ambulatory nature of Rainer’s post-modern dance to perform this industrial passivity. The walking and running sections perform as contentment to spend time in transition without a commitment to change.

### **2.3 AUDIO DESCRIPTION**

Audio description (AD) is a narration process that describes visual and performing art for blind, low vision, or visually impaired audience members. I find AD to be an endlessly fascinating technique to deploy when writing and speaking about dance. What should be prioritized when describing moving bodies? How might an audience naturally prioritize a multi-media experience? Numerous ethical questions surround the practice of AD, namely around the popular idea that the narration should be objective and unanalytical in order to let the AD user reach their own conclusions about the performance. As a trained audio describer, I align myself with the more progressive side of the field as I argue that objectivity is impossible, especially when describing bodies in motion as the words one uses are sourced from a narrator’s personal background. For example, I describe myself in *Best Practices*, as a “mix(ing) race Asian American person.” Including my racial and gender identity is imperative to

the work as it informs and shades my research questions about the performance of institutional systems and democratic processes. However, a different narrator not availed of my research or identity may disagree. Instead, I believe AD narrators should be informed of any additional information that may be necessary to represent the artistic activity. In *Best Practices*, I push AD's presumed limitations even further through my experimental, incomplete, and nonlinear narrative. While part of this is because of the film's editing style, which is discussed later on, I also chose to write a narration this way in order to best reflect the scores' simple, yet abstract diagrams and my own post-modern movement style. An excerpt from the AD narration script for the democratic ladder theory dance reads:

*Walks back and forth on a diagonal*  
*Shadow hand draws upwards diagonal line*  
*Running backward, forwards, and in a slim elliptical*  
*Arms pump alongside*  
*Another diagonal drawn*  
*Arm extends sideways, her body rotates around, bringing arm in front*  
*Feet, a steady motor underneath*

In this linear version of the script, which aligns with the beginning of the unedited footage, the listener follows the dance as it progresses. However, in the film, a similar excerpt has the following narration:

*Hopping*  
*Stu-jointed arms frame*  
*Shadowed hand emerges*

The description is short, segmented and slightly nonsensical. I chose this kind of editing to both provide audio description narration about the

choreography, but also to visually reflect the choppy, disjointed visual editing of the film. Because AD primarily sits between dialogue, and the narrator is responsible for describing all visual components, an experimental approach was necessary in order to best represent the film as a complete endeavor.

## 2.4 SOUND SCORE & SCRIPT

The sound score and script originate from Carey Burt's 2013 film *Mind Control Made Easy (or How to Become a Cult Leader)*. I was first exposed to *Mind Control* through a remixed version of the film, *RECRUITMENT 2016* (2015), in which the video's editor, Victoria Valentine, creates the impression that Southern panhellenic sororities are cults through repetitive cuts and manipulated sound. My own remixed, nonprofit industrial complex-related script of *Mind Control* is influenced by the sorority-remix but uses shifts in the script to underline my perspective instead of changing the video content. The sound score is directly sourced from the original film and is interwoven into the final soundscape with the script and audio description.

## 2.5 Editing

Joshua Dumas edited *Best Practices* by feeding the video and audio files through a preset code they developed for another project in which I was involved as a collaborator. I echo my previous ethical considerations about engaging Woods for Dumas' involvement as they are also white. Additionally, while Dumas wrote the code, a computer's binary ultimately created the film's edit which creates an inherently contrasting edge to my otherwise non-binary engagements in this research. I further manipulated the film by adding a gradual tempo increase that is initially unnoticed by the spectator until a final, high-pitched tone emerges as a mimicry of ringing in the ears. The result created a fragmented, kaleidoscopic, trance-

inducing experience visually, physically, and sonically. The hypnotic feeling is intentional and further enhanced by the occasional breakthrough of a coherent sentence of the AD or script. The unexpected cuts and shifts in scenes contribute to a feeling of constant, repetitive censorship. My words and body never reach their full potential, but not by “my” choice.

### **3. THE FUTURE OF *BEST PRACTICES***

How does white supremacy embed itself in predominately white, nonprofit arts institutions? Can I dance democracy to imagine a more inclusive government system; what can be gained by overreading or embodying institutional systems and democratic processes? And how can I resist the white gaze through illegibility? I did not necessarily answer any of my core research questions through the creation and analysis of *Best Practices*. In fact, at the end of the process, I am left doubting whether it is worthwhile to even engage with the subject matter instead of dedicating time to imagining alternative strategies. But I still find resonance in the act of remembering to critique the systems with which I engage as a scholar, artist, and administrator.

*Best Practices* as a satirical film attempts to overread my body in motion under four institutional systems and democratic processes. Through a performance as research methodology, I employ my role as a dance maker, administratively and artistically, to explore an experimental intervention into fiscal sponsorship, a negative, reinforcing feedback loop, the democratic ladder, and community engagement strategy. What I discovered is that the work is difficult, fuzzy, and unnatural. The layers of response to my core questions—the projected, live notation drawings, my attempts to dance the diagrams, the audio description, the script and sound score, and the editing process—all fail to communicate straightforward, realistic ideas. My body cannot make a straight line,

become an arrow, or create a ladder. This reflection may seem oversimplified, but it in fact only underlines the argument that historically marginalized bodies cannot be as legible or supported under the current system of democracy in the United States. *Best Practice's* editing style reflects the feelings of disempowerment and despair, that an individual cannot enact change because of the lack of transparency and access points into the institutional systems and democratic processes. But, by creating a satirical film to address these systemic issues, I poke fun at the systems developed and performed by humans to find their weaknesses and inspire a desire for change. Ultimately, I hope the film and my research prompt audiences to recognize and support alternative, community-led pathways that are developed in partnership, flexibility, and joy.

## WORKS CITED

- “About the Journal.” *PARTake*, [partakejournal.org/index.php/partake/about](http://partakejournal.org/index.php/partake/about).
- Bixler, Patrick R. “Mobilizing Communities and Engaging Volunteers.” 1 January 2022, Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX. Lecture.
- Blake, Carrie, et al. *Advancing Fiscally Sponsored Dance Artists & Projects*. Dance/NYC, 2017.
- Burt, Carey. “Mind Control Made Easy (or How to Become a Cult Leader).” *YouTube*, uploaded by Carey Burt Films, 20 December 2013, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvVHPVe525Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvVHPVe525Q).
- . “Mind Control Made Easy – Original Music.” *YouTube*, uploaded 5 April 2021, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1XwnnRvchl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l1XwnnRvchl)
- Cinelli, Matteo, et al. “The Echo Chamber Effect on Social Media.” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, vol. 118, no. 9, 2021, pp. 1-8.
- Colvin, Gregory L. and Stephanie L. Petit. *Fiscal Sponsorship: 6 Ways To Do It Right*. 3rd ed., San Francisco, Study Center Press, 2019. [FiscalSponsorshipDirectory.org](http://FiscalSponsorshipDirectory.org). <https://fiscalsponsordirectory.org/>.
- Hamera, Judith. *Dancing Communities: Performance, Difference, and Connection in the Global City*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- “Judson Dance Theater: The Work is Never Done.” *Dancing in Museums: A Decade of Movement – Art & Education*. [www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/306382/judson-dance-theater-the-work-is-never-done](http://www.artandeducation.net/classroom/video/306382/judson-dance-theater-the-work-is-never-done).
- Kedhar, Anusha. *Flexible Bodies: British South Asian Dancers in an Age of Neoliberalism*. New York, Oxford University Press, 2021.

- Markusen, Ann and Anne Gadwa. *Creative Placemaking*. Washington, D.C., National Endowment for the Arts, 2010.
- Martin, Randy. *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*. Durham, Duke University Press, 1998.
- Nicodemus, Anne Gadwa. "Fuzzy Vibrancy: Creative Placemaking as Ascendant US Cultural Policy." *Cultural trends* 22.3-4 (2013): 213–222. Web.
- Perrin, Andrew J. *American Democracy: from Tocqueville to Town Halls to Twitter*. Polity, 2014.
- Platt, Ryan. "The Ambulatory Aesthetics of Yvonne Rainer's 'Trio A.'" *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 46, no. 1, Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 41–60.
- Rainer, Yvonne. "Some retrospective notes on a dance for 10 people and 12 mattresses called 'Parts of Some Sextets,' performed at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, Hartford, Connecticut, and the Judson Memorial Church, New York, in March 1965," *The Drama Review*, vol. 10, no. 2 (Winter 1965): 178.
- . "Trio A (The Mind is a Muscle – Part I)." *YouTube*. Uploaded 8 October 2019. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_vHqIMFDbQI&t=190s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_vHqIMFDbQI&t=190s).
- Stroh, David Peter. *Systems Thinking for Social Change*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2015.
- Valentine, Victoria. "RECRUITMENT 2016." *Vimeo*. Uploaded 3 December 2015. <https://vimeo.com/147767325>.
- Villanueva, Edgar. *Decolonizing Wealth: Indigenous Wisdom to Heal Divides and Restore Balance*. Oakland, Berret-Koehler Publishers, 2018.
- Walker, Darren. "Extraordinary Times, Extraordinary Measures." *Ford Foundation*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.fordfoundation.org/news->

[and-stories/stories/posts/extraordinary-times-extraordinary-measures/](#).

Wilbur, Sarah. *Funding Bodies: Five Decades of Dancing Making at the National Endowment for the Arts*. Middletown, Wesleyan University Press, 2020.

Woods, Shannon. Personal interview. 19 April 2022.

“Yvonne Rainer.” *In Terms of Performance*.

<http://intermsofperformance.site/interviews/yvonne-rainer>.